

“Norwich – the Most Godless City”

When the 2011 Population Census results for religion were announced, details were given for each Local or Unitary Authority. Norwich had the highest percentage of those saying they had “No Religion” (42%) against a national average of 27%, and the press labelled it sensationally as “the most Godless city in England”.

Why is it “Godless”?

It is true the 42% percentage is the highest out of all the 328 Local or Unitary Authorities in England,¹ but the conclusion that Norwich is the most Godless city does not follow. For instance, Norfolk as a whole (in which Norwich is technically the county town) has an above average number of people who ticked that they were Christian (61% against 59% nationally).

There are also specific reasons why this particular No Religion figure was so high:

- *Many young people.* 29% of Norwich’s population is between the ages of 20 and 34, an exceptionally high percentage when the average in England is only 20% – about 12,000 more than would be expected. It is this age-group, nationally and in Norwich, which mostly says it has No Religion.
- *Many overseas students.* Norwich houses the University of East Anglia (UEA) which has 15,000 students. When the Census is taken British students are counted as living in the town where their home is, but overseas students in the place where they are studying. So all the UEA overseas students will count towards Norwich’s population, and many of these were more likely to say they had No Religion.
- *Many Chinese in Norwich.* The city of Norwich had 6,000 people in its population who are Asian, a third of whom are Chinese. As 55% of all Chinese in the Census declared they had “No religion”, then the Norwich figure will have been influenced by its Chinese and other Asian population.
- *Many “Mixed” people in Norwich.* Norwich has 2.3% of its population describing themselves of mixed ethnicity, almost three times as many as in Norfolk as a whole. A quarter (23%) of these 3,000 people say they have No Religion as well. So another element of the ethnic make-up of Norwich also contributes to its “Godlessness.”

It should also be noted that although Norwich turns out to have the highest percentage of people saying they have No Religion, and, as a consequence, a lower-than-average percentage of Christians, the percentage saying they are Christians in Norwich (45%, higher than the 43% with No Religion) is not the lowest in the country. Norwich has a higher percentage of Christians than Leicester (32%) or Nottingham (44%), and several Inner London Boroughs, for example. If Godlessness is defined as having “No Religion” (and this could be disputed), then Norwich might top the poll, but if “Christian” is seen as the opposite of “Godless”, then Norwich is less “Godless” than it has been designated (that is, all measurements depend on the yardstick used)!

When the Church of England heard the “Godless” vibe, Bishop Graham James rejoined that Norwich was the second fastest growing diocese in the Church of England and that the Cathedral had seen 2,500 taking Communion during Easter week. The Roman Catholics also had 3,000 in attendance.

We now need to look at other aspects of religion in Norwich. This paper focuses on the overall picture of the number of those in other ethnicities, those following other religions, but then concentrates on the number of Christian adherents, and the number of churchgoers, their denomination, age and churchmanship, and trends for the future if current changes continue.

¹ Prior to 1st April 2009 the total number was 356.

Ethnicity

The ethnic make-up of Norwich is very different from that of Norfolk as a whole, as the figures in Table 1 indicate. It shows that Norwich has a higher percentage of Indians, Chinese and Other Asians than in Norfolk generally (3.8% altogether compared with 0.9%), and indeed a higher percentage of Chinese than in the whole of England (1.2% to 0.7%). It also has a higher percentage of Black people but smaller than in England overall (1.6% to 3.4%).

Table 1: Ethnicity of Norwich and Norfolk populations, 2011

Group:	White %	Asian %	Black %	Mixed %	Other %	Asian					Black			Base (=100%)
						Indian %	Paki. %	Bangla %	Chin. %	Other %	African %	Carib. %	Other %	
Norwich	90.9	4.4	1.6	2.3	0.8	1.3	0.2	0.4	1.2	1.3	1.3	0.2	0.1	132,512
Rest of Norfolk	97.5	1.0	0.3	1.0	0.2	0.2	0.1	0.0	0.3	0.4	0.1	0.1	0.1	725,376
All Norfolk	96.5	1.5	0.5	1.2	0.3	0.4	0.1	0.1	0.4	0.5	0.3	0.1	0.1	857,888
All England	85.7	7.7	3.4	2.2	1.0	2.7	2.0	0.8	0.7	1.5	1.8	1.1	0.5	53.0 m
Churchgoers in Norfolk, 2005	95.0	2.1	2.7	~	0.2	<-	0.9	->	0.5	0.7	~	~	~	44,800

Ethnicity was measured in the 2005 English Church Census and the figures are given for Norfolk (not being available for Norwich) in the bottom line of the Table. The groupings used were not quite identical to the 2011 Population Census, but show that the churches had better proportions of Blacks attending than those living in Norfolk generally, as is common throughout England, 2.7% to 0.5%, which shows that 28% of Norfolk's Black population attend church. This compares with 7% of the Asian population and 5% of the White population.

Table 1 helps put the "Godlessness" of Norwich into perspective with its relatively high percentage of Asians and Mixed people, both of which groups have greater numbers of those saying they have No Religion.

Other Religions

Table 2 gives a breakdown of the religious position of Norwich as against Norfolk, and Norfolk as against England, for both the years 2001 and 2011, the two years in which they have recently been measured by Population Censuses.

Table 2: Religion in Norwich, Norfolk and England, 2001 and 2011

Religion	2001			2011		
	Norwich %	Norfolk %	England %	Norwich %	Norfolk %	England %
Christian	60	74	72	45	61	59
Other religions	2	1	6	5	2	9
No Religion	28	17	14	42	30	25
Not stated	10	8	8	8	7	7
Base (=100%)	0.12 mn	0.80 mn	49.14 mn	0.13 mn	0.86 mn	53.01 mn

Table 2 shows that Norfolk has had more Christian adherents than England as a whole in both years, and Norwich considerably less – in terms of numbers ticking "Christian". It also shows that many people indicated "No Religion" in Norwich in 2001 also, presumably because of the numbers of young people in the city more than the ethnicity of its population, since the number belonging to other

religions has considerably increased in the inter-censal decade. Numbers of Christians have declined simply because so many older Christians are dying. Deaths outnumber conversions nationally 4 to 1!

The main Other Religion in Norwich is Islam, which tripled to 2,600 in 2011 from 900 in 2001. Hindus have also tripled to 1,000 from 350, followed by Buddhists at 1,000, up from 500, Sikhs (170 from 100), and those in Other religions up to 900 from 600. Only the Jews remain the same number in both years, at 240.

Meaning of Christian

In a very helpful article about the Census results, Linda Woodhead, Professor of Sociology of Religion at Lancaster University, suggests the simple range of answers to the Census question does not really indicate religious identity.² She refers to recent publications which break down the “Christian” category into:

- Moral Christians, who admire Christian ethics and aspire to live by them.
- Faithful Christians, who do orthodox things such as attending church and reading the Bible.
- Cradle Christians, who tick the box because they were baptised and brought up Christian.
- Ethnic Christians who say they are Christian because they are British.

Furthermore, research has found that at least 12% of Census Christians do not consider themselves religious, only 54% believe in a personal God, and, according to latest attendance figures, 90% do not attend church.

Churchgoers

The number of Christian adherents is important, but so is the number who show a practical behavioural manifestation of that faith by attending church on an average Sunday. These numbers, shown in Table 3, come from the various English Church Censuses which have been undertaken in previous years, amended here by the latest published attendance figures of the Roman Catholics, Anglicans and Methodists, and then forecast through to 2012. This figure requires another Church Census to confirm or disprove!

It may be seen that the number of churchgoers has almost halved in the 23 years from 1989 to 2012, reducing from 63,000 to 37,000 across Norfolk as a whole, and from 8.4% of the population to 4.3%. Norwich, in that context, has done better. While the number of its churchgoers has also halved, as a percentage of the population they are higher than those of Norfolk as a whole. The percentage of Norfolk’s churchgoers attending in Norwich has declined a little – from 23% in 1989 to 20% in 2012.

Table 3: Numbers attending church and their percentage of the population, 1989 to 2012E

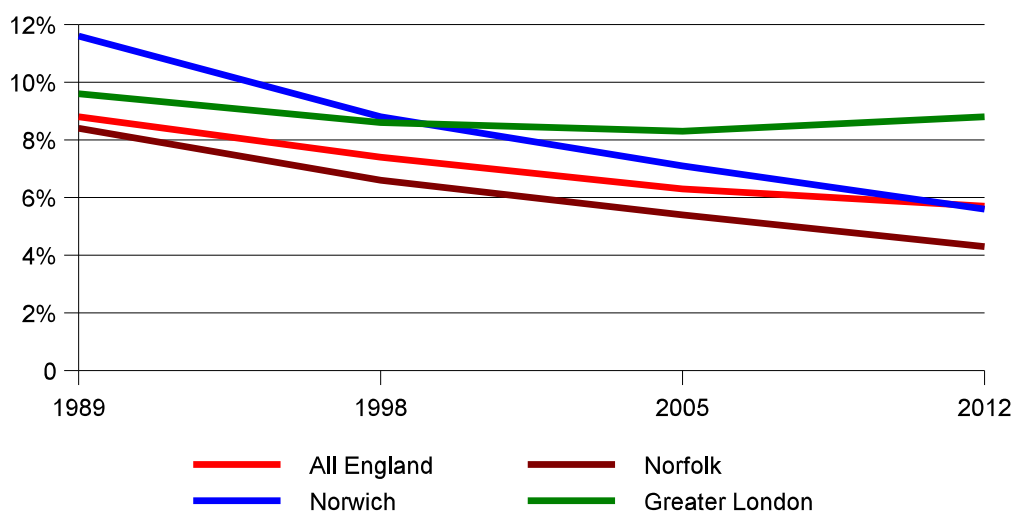
Local Authority	Population		Churchgoers				% of population			
	2001	2011	1989	1998	2005	2012E	1989	1998	2005	2012E
Breckland	121,418	130,491	8,800	8,400	8,200	7,600	8.3	7.2	6.6	5.7
Broadland	118,513	124,646	6,100	5,700	5,200	4,700	5.8	5.0	4.3	3.7
Great Yarmouth	90,810	97,277	4,700	4,000	3,500	2,900	5.4	4.4	3.7	3.0
King’s Lynn & West Norfolk	135,345	147,451	8,600	7,400	6,400	5,300	6.7	5.5	4.5	3.6
North Norfolk	98,382	101,499	10,900	8,400	6,600	4,700	11.9	8.8	6.7	4.6
Norwich	121,550	132,512	14,200	11,000	9,100	7,300	11.6	8.8	7.1	5.6
South Norfolk	110,710	124,012	9,300	7,400	5,800	4,100	9.3	6.7	5.0	3.3
TOTAL: NORFOLK	796,728	857,888	62,600	52,300	44,800	36,600	8.4	6.6	5.4	4.3

² “Faith that won’t fit the mould” by Linda Woodhead in *The Tablet*, 15 December 2012.

Norwich's church attendance in 2012 is estimated to be 5.6%, or 1 in every 18 people living there. That compares with 3.5% in Gloucester (population 120,000), 3.6% in Coventry (320,000), 3.9% in Wolverhampton (250,000), 4.0% in Brighton (270,000), 4.2% in Cheltenham (120,000), 4.4% for Bristol (430,000), 4.4% in Derby (250,000), 4.5% in Bournemouth (180,000), 4.6% in Peterborough (180,000), 4.6% in Plymouth (260,000), 5.3% in Chelmsford (170,000), 5.4% in Milton Keynes (250,000), 5.4% in Southampton (240,000), 5.8% in Eastbourne (100,000), 6.0% in Manchester (500,000), 6.9% in Cambridge (125,000), 7.8% in Reading (160,000), 7.9% in Basingstoke (170,000), 7.9% in Luton (200,000), 8.3% in Carlisle (110,000), 8.3% in Winchester (120,000), and so on. In these comparisons, Norwich is doing better than some towns, worse than others, and stands about the middle of the pack, as it were. The All England percentage is 5.7%.

The percentages of attendance for Norfolk and Norwich are shown in Figure 1, with All England for comparison, and also for London, showing how it is very different.

Figure 1: Percentage of the population attending church, 1989-2012



Norwich is very different from London

Over the past 15 years and especially the last 7 years, London has seen a huge amount of church planting and a consequential rapid increase in numbers attending. There are 700 more churches in London in 2012 than in 2005, and almost 100,000 more people, due to many new Black churches being started and many churches for immigrants. They are growing because black people are keen to win their neighbours for Christ, and start a new church close to where they live. There are simply hundreds of such churches, many small, but inspiringly led. There are also churches which draw people to them across London (easier in Inner London where bus and underground links are so good). In addition, there are many large churches in London, and generally they are growing too. Perhaps these figures suggest that Norwich churches need to reach across the barriers of youthfulness and ethnicity in order to see the Kingdom grow in their town.

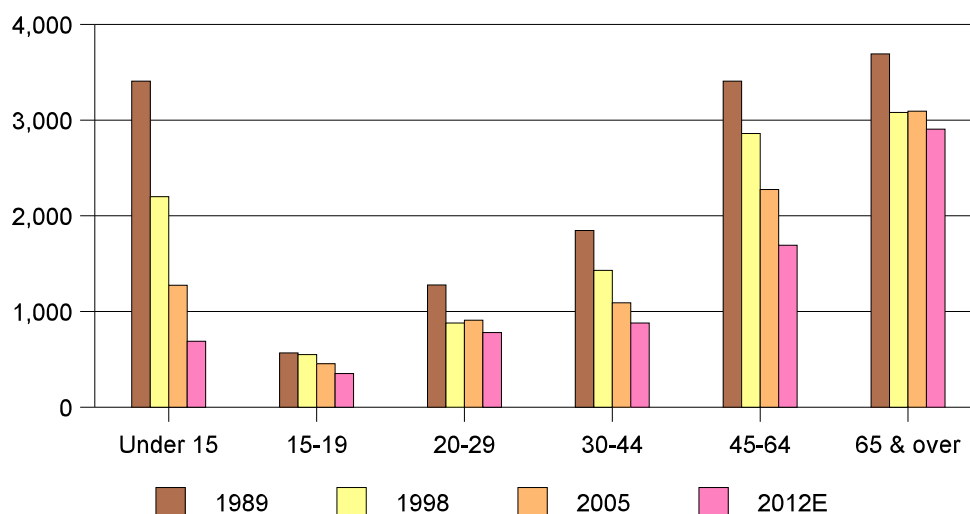
Of particular interest, and an area in which London is especially different, is the age of churchgoers. While 13% of the English population is aged between 20 and 29, 18% of London's population is in this age-group as many young people come to look for, or obtain, employment. Some 6% of these go to church, twice the national percentage for that age-group. They particularly attend the large evangelical churches in the heart of London – Holy Trinity, Brompton, St Helen's, Bishops-gate, All Souls, Langham Place, Hillsong in the Dominion Theatre, Jesus House for all Nations in Brent, Ruach Ministries in Brixton, Glory House in Plaistow, etc. Two-fifths of all the churchgoers aged 20-29 attending in England go to church in Inner London!

The Redeemed Christian Church of God is currently the fastest growing black Pentecostal church in the UK, and has started a church in Norwich. Perhaps this will inspire other churches in winning Norwich for Christ.

The age of churchgoers

Figure 2 shows the age of churchgoers in Norwich.

Figure 2: Age of churchgoers in Norwich, 1989 to 2012E



The decline in Norwich churchgoers is especially seen in those under 15, and those aged 45 to 64 (many of whom will be parents of teenage or older children). The numbers in their twenties have held up remarkably well, and reflect the relatively large number of people that age in Norwich. Some may be overseas students, but others will be older looking for work or in work. Local farms, the Norwich Research Park, the Hospital or University or new industries may be attracting them.

While there has been decline in each age group, the least proportionate decline is among the oldest, 65 and over. Those in their 30s and early 40s, many likely to be young parents, have also dropped by over half. Each age group presents strategic opportunities for outreach in Norwich. For example, could family ministry be used to reach the 45 to 64 age group?

There is, unfortunately, no reason to believe that the trends seen in Figure 2 will greatly alter in the immediate future. That is to say, the following characteristics are true of Norwich churchgoers:

- A decreasing proportion of the total are young people. In 2012, only 14% (one in seven) were under 20 years of age.
- The proportion of those aged 20 to 44 is also decreasing, although not quite as rapidly as those under 20. In 2012, a quarter, 23%, of churchgoers were estimated to be in this age-group.
- The number of churchgoers 45 and over is also decreasing, but forming the majority, over three-fifths, 63%, of the overall total.

These trends are very similar to what is happening nationally, and, while Figure 2 gives details across all denominations, the trends will most likely also be true for each denomination. Reversing these trends is therefore critical for the future of the church, nationally as well as in the city of Norwich. Bob Jackson has suggested ways of trying to attract young people in his latest book³, and a willingness for senior leadership to explore change, take risks and recognise existing leadership is essential.

The problems of reaching middle-aged people are different as they have distinctive pressures and responsibilities, but the need to grow lay leadership in order that they may be more effectively reached is again key. It is equally true that older people often require encouragement to continue to serve, and sometimes recognising this in distinctive ways can be very helpful.

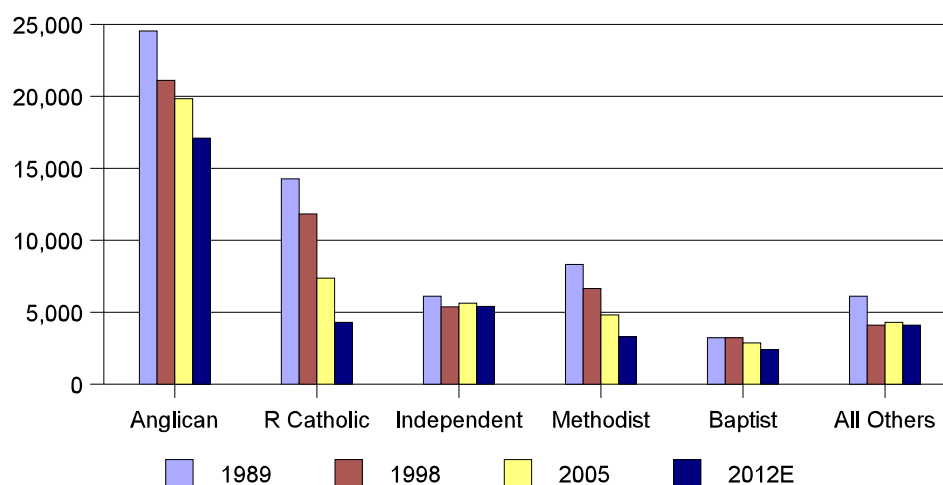
³ *The Road to Growth Towards a Thriving Church*, Ven Bob Jackson, Church House Publishing, London, 2005.

Thinking strategically about the clear importance of incorporating younger people and those with young families into the life of existing churches is a critical and formidable challenge. The situation is urgent: the average age of a person living in Norwich in 2001 was 37. The average age of a churchgoer in 1989 in Norwich was 43 and in 2012 it was 52. What does this say about the image of the church?

Norfolk figures

While the focus of this paper has been the number of Christians and churchgoers in Norwich, other information about Norfolk has been published, which unfortunately is not available broken down by individual Local Authority, so can only be given at county level. Norfolk church attendance is shown by the main denominational groups in Figure 3 (Independent includes New Churches):

Figure 3: Usual Sunday church attendance in Norfolk by denomination, 1989 to 2012E



While all have seen decline over these 23 years, the Roman Catholics have declined most, by two-thirds, followed by the Methodists, by three-fifths. The Independent churches have declined least, by just 12%, partly because of the buoyancy of the New Churches. The Anglicans have declined by a third, the Baptists by a quarter. The Anglican proportion of the whole has increased to almost half, 47%, by 2012. Figure 3 shows Sunday attendance; Anglicans, for example, have another 4,000+ people coming mid-week in addition.

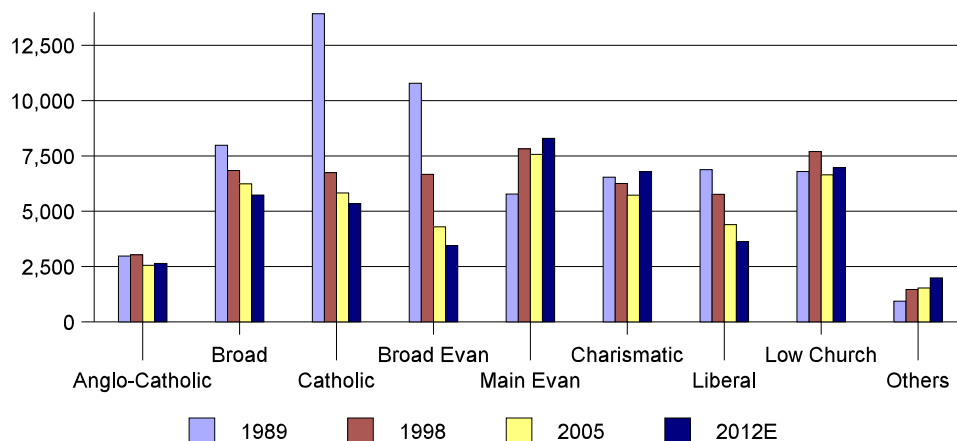
The stability seen in the “All Others” group of churches from 1998 to 2012 (the Orthodox, Pentecostal, URC and Smaller denominations) is due to an increasing number of Pentecostal churches, offsetting URC decline. It will be important for the future to ensure that those of different ethnic diversities are warmly welcomed within the different church structures.

Churchmanship

Since 1989, each Church Census has requested the churchmanship of a congregation, and Figure 4 on the next page gives the attendance numbers. The large drop in the number of Catholics (not to be equated solely with Roman Catholics, as a number of Anglicans will also call themselves Catholic or Anglo-Catholic), follows the decline in denominational numbers of Roman Catholics. The churchmanship changes are not as dramatic as the denominational ones, and show increases in the numbers of mainstream Evangelicals and Charismatics.

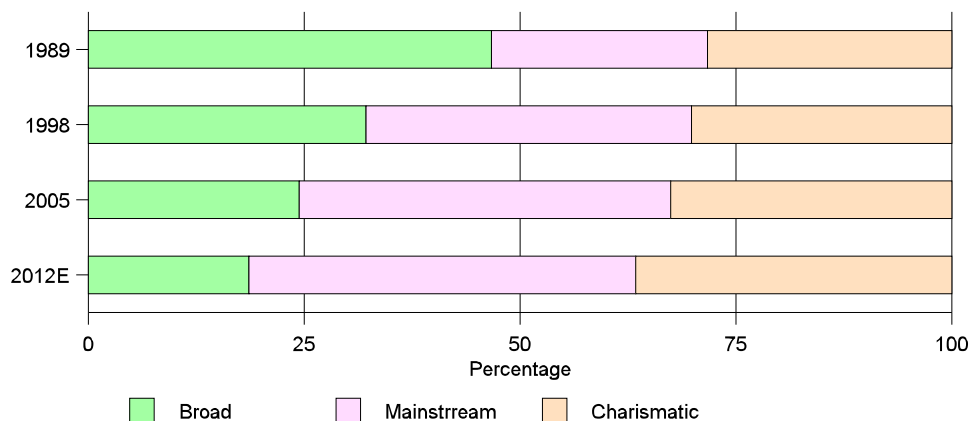
The largest group collectively are the Evangelicals (total of Broad, Mainstream and Charismatic) which, in 2012, were two-fifths, 41%, of the total. If those of a Broad and Liberal persuasion were added together they only come to a fifth, 21%, of the whole. The Evangelicals are slowly growing as a proportion of the whole, from 37% in 1989 to 41% in 2012.

Figure 4: Usual Sunday church attendance in Norfolk by churchmanship, 1989 to 2012E



The three Evangelical groups are changing in their proportions as shown in Figure 5, with both the Mainstream and Charismatic growing at the expense of the Broad:

Figure 5: Proportions of different types of Evangelicals in Norfolk, 1989-2012E



Number of Churches

The number of churches in Norfolk has been published up to 2005,⁴ and figures for 2010 and estimated for 2015 and 2020 will, God willing, be published in *UK Church Statistics 2010 to 2020* in 2014.⁵ The figures are given for all years in Table 4, and for Norwich in 2005, the only year available:

Table 4: Number of churches in Norfolk by denomination, 1989 to 2020E

Year	A	B	C	I	M	N	O	P	U	S	TOTAL
1989	678	51	51	46	236	25	5	10	20	32	1,154
1998	670	41	50	47	195	29	5	10	19	29	1,095
2005	664	33	42	49	171	39	5	19	17	35	1,074
2010	653	27	33	57	152	43	5	22	16	42	1,050
2015E	645	22	28	65	132	43	5	26	15	46	1,027
2020E	640	15	24	69	112	38	5	30	13	49	995
Norwich 2005	36	3	4	14	6	7	4	3	5	4	86

E = Estimated A = Anglican B = Baptist C = Roman Catholic I = Independent M = Methodist N = New Churches
O = Orthodox P = Pentecostal U = United Reformed Church S = Smaller Denominations

⁴ *Religious Trends* No 6, 2006/2007, Christian Research, Eltham, London, Table 12.72.3.

⁵ ADBC Publishers, Tonbridge, Kent, edited by Peter Brierley.

When *Daily Mail* journalist Robert Hardman visited Norwich he said, “It used to be Norwich’s proud boast that it had a church for every week of the year.”⁶ The date to which that relates is unknown but is probably 19th century. Since then Norwich has seen many churches started, especially Independent and New Churches. Church planting remains one of the better ways of seeing church growth as the London experience has shown and also the rapid increase of what are called “Messy Churches” and other types of Fresh Expressions. Holy Trinity, Brompton, an exceptional church planting fellowship, has recently started St Thomas in Norwich, Gateway Vineyard is a plant from Norwich Vineyard and King's Community Church has begun a new congregation in Mile Cross. Perhaps local church planting could be part of the outreach of current Norwich churches.

Norfolk has relatively few large churches (more than 200 on an average Sunday), just 6% in 2005 compared with 12% in England generally, and 42% with 25 or fewer people because of its rural nature (against 28% across England as a whole).

So what does this suggest for the future?

This paper has not looked at social factors or the community work of Norfolk churches, which is considerable, and a key mechanism for outreach in many instances. It does show:

- There are special reasons why Norwich might be dubbed “Godless”, arising from the number of young people and immigrants from especially Asia, but it should not be concluded that “God” is absent! More people ticked “Christian” than “No Religion”.
- Other religions as well as No Religion are growing in Norwich.
- Nonetheless, the percentage of Norwich’s population attending church has declined over the 23 years 1989 to 2012, halving in this quarter-century, from 11.6% to 5.6%. It is likely to continue to decline.
- It should be noted that, apart from Breckland, Norwich has a higher percentage of churchgoers than any other Local Authority District in Norfolk, and is comparable to many other towns in England.
- Some parts of the country are seeing growth, especially London. Perhaps London’s church planting enthusiasm might be a way forward for those in Norwich.
- One of the key issues in Norwich’s church attendance is the declining numbers of young people, in common with the rest of the UK (and the Western world). While the number of older churchgoers is also declining, they are increasing in their proportion of the whole churchgoing community. What part can they play in evangelism both among their contemporaries and those younger?
- It is the non-institutional churches which are holding their attendance best. Why are the institutional churches failing to attract newcomers?
- The Evangelicals are growing in Norfolk (as in the rest of the UK), especially Mainstream and Charismatic Evangelicals. How might their vibrancy spill over into those of other persuasions and would it be welcome?
- A number of churches will continue to close each year. What is the future of such churches?
- Church leaders face many challenges! What are the most strategic implications of these future trends? What actions can be taken to reverse some of them and encourage others?

⁶ *Network Norwich and Norfolk* article, www.networknorwich.co.uk, 2nd October 2013.

Numbers on which figures are based; not part of hand-out. For reference only.

	A	B	RC	Ind	M	New	O	P	URC	Sm
1989	24,547	3,228	14,270	4,332	8,324	1,784	255	1,104	1,699	3,058
1998	21,116	3,226	11,829	2,933	6,647	2,444	293	684	880	2,248
2005	19,843	2,864	7,364	3,171	4,807	2,455	205	1,023	818	2,250
2012	17,100	2,400	4,300	3,200	3,300	2,200	200	1,200	700	2,000

	A	RC	I + N	M	B	All O	TOTAL
1989	24,547	14,270	6,116	8,324	3,228	6,116	62,600
1998	21,116	11,829	5,377	6,647	3,226	4,105	52,300
2005	19,843	7,364	5,626	4,807	2,864	4,296	44,800
2012	17,100	4,300	5,400	3,300	2,400	4,100	36,600

	A-C	Br	C	BE	EM	EC	Lib	Low	Others
1989	2,973	7,984	13,930	10,787	5,776	6,540	6,880	6,795	934
1998	3,030	6,843	6,745	6,670	7,821	6,256	5,768	7,700	1,466
2005	2,557	6,239	5,830	4,296	7,569	5,728	4,398	6,648	1,534
2012E	2,641	5,730	5,336	3,447	8,296	6,785	3,631	6,967	1,987

	< 15	15-19	20-29	30-44	45-64	65/65+	Total
1989	3,408	568	1,278	1,846	3,408	3,692	14,200
1998	2,200	550	880	1,430	2,860	3,080	11,000
2005	1,274	455	910	1,092	2,275	3,094	9,100
2012E	690	352	780	880	1,692	2,906	7,300